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A three-week tour of duty in the Kandahar region of Afghanistan was among the most harrowing times of U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk's 18 years in the Navy Reserves.

"It was very much of a combat environment," he said. "Our base got shelled once. We heard small-arms fire. I never got shot at, but it was a very tense situation."

Kirk, of Highland Park, a commander in the reserves, returned from Afghanistan on Monday and is scheduled to be sworn in with the new U.S. Congress today.

Afghanistan is at a dangerous crossroads, he said, because the Taliban, once religiously opposed to drugs and drug use, has embraced the area's heroin trade.

"The Taliban chose to become the narco-Taliban and is making hundreds of millions," he said, noting that the cash infusion has increased its status as a threat and financed the increase of violence in the region.

During the tour, he served as a special adviser for counter-narcotics with NATO. He said multi-national work is under way to develop an anti-narcotic plan for the Helmand River Valley, which produces half of the world's heroin supply.

Part of the effort includes convincing farmers to choose wheat as a crop over poppies, but the threat of Taliban violence makes that a tough job.

"Over time, farmers have tended not to like working for drug dealers," he said. "They want to be on the winning side, so it's very important for us to be seen as the winning side."

He said it is important for an increasing NATO force to help develop and strengthen the Afghanistan army and police "so we can leave."

He also said the success of the upcoming democratic election in Afghanistan is key. All of the candidates "are anti-drug and anti-Taliban," he said.

He joked that he was surprised to hear people complaining about the cold in the Chicago area upon his return.

"I was more cold there than I've ever been," he said. "In the mountains, the cold gets into your marrow."

This article was edited to comply with Franking Commission guidelines.